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U.S. Department of Transportation Proposes New Safety Requirements for Rural Low-Stress and Gathering Pipelines in Unusually Sensitive Areas

Certain pipeline operators will have to meet new, more rigorous safety requirements, including cleaning and continuous monitoring, along more than 1,200 miles of pipelines under a proposed rulemaking announced today by Acting Secretary of Transportation Maria Cino. If the proposed rule is finalized, the Department would regulate additional pipelines that would pose a significant risk to human health and the environment.

"This rule will help restore public confidence in America's pipelines," said Acting Secretary Cino. Cino noted that the proposed rule would prevent the kind of maintenance lapses that led to a partial shutdown of 22 miles of low-stress pipelines operated by BP in northern Alaska. Cino added that the proposed rule would impose requirements similar to those for high-pressure pipelines that already have added protections for drinking water, endangered species habitats and other areas defined as "unusually sensitive areas."

The proposed new rule will, for the first time, require companies that operate low-pressure pipelines in unusually sensitive areas, like Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, to comply with federal safety regulations similar to those applied to high-pressure pipelines, which are established by the U.S. Department of Transportation's Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA).

Pipeline operators would have to develop comprehensive programs to regularly monitor pipelines. For example, operators would be required to assess integrity by methods such as running internal inspection devices through their pipelines and review any changes in crude oil quality that might contribute to corrosion. In addition, under the proposed rule, operators would be required to regularly check their pipelines for leaks.

"A strong and clearly defined pipeline safety program is an absolute minimum," said PHMSA Administrator Thomas Barrett.

Barrett noted that the agency began developing the rulemaking about three years ago as part of a broader effort to improve the safety of the nation's pipelines. He added that the public will have 60 days to comment on the proposed rule.

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